

SINGAPORE

University jobs and traineeships for coronavirus cohort

Yojana Sharma 28 April 2020

With a bleak employment outlook for students during the coronavirus crisis, Singapore's universities are stepping up their efforts to boost employability and job prospects for the cohort with a generous government-backed plan of hundreds of jobs and paid traineeships at their own institutions, and tuition fee deferrals for those going on to a masters degree at the same university.

In particular, the universities are keen to ensure that the coronavirus cohort – which will have missed classes as universities shut down or shifted to online courses with variable success – is not disadvantaged in comparison to graduates of previous or subsequent years, with a raft of heavily subsidised continuing education classes, which could lead to mini-masters degrees.

Acknowledging that the COVID-19 pandemic will weaken the job market and the financial situation of many families, the National University of Singapore (NUS) announced on 24 April that students graduating this year who enrol in any masters degree at the university can defer payment of course fees interest-free for up to three years from the date of enrolment.

NUS, which has a graduating class of around 7,000 undergraduates is creating 1,000 full-time jobs and paid traineeships at the university.

Nanyang Technological University (NTU), with around 5,700 final-year undergraduates, is offering hundreds of paid traineeships under the government's Workforce Singapore programme, which provides 80% of the training allowance to eligible graduates this year.

Singapore, which had early success in fighting the disease, with only three deaths in March, has faced a five-fold surge in coronavirus cases to a total of 14,423 in just the past two weeks reportedly brought in by **students returning from abroad** and among its migrant worker population crammed into dormitories. The number of cases is now the third highest in Asia. There have been 14 COVID-19 deaths in Singapore as of 28 April.

“The Singapore economic outlook for graduating students right now is very bad. The job market worldwide looks terrible. There will be a global glut of graduating talent,” said Linda Lim, professor emerita at the Stephen M Ross School of Business, University of Michigan, and an expert on the Singapore economy.

But while larger countries like Britain and the United States are forecasting a drop in gross domestic product of around 35% due to the pandemic, “for Singapore it could be a drop of two thirds,” she said. In addition, with China and the rest of Asia also affected by the coronavirus, “we can expect that there is no global pool, no regional job creation, no domestic job pool”.

She described the generous Singapore universities' scheme as "an innovative approach".

"Singapore has relatively well-funded universities so they can do this, but it is a stopgap measure" which has its limitations in the medium to longer term, she said, pointing to major changes ahead in the world economy in the wake of the pandemic, which could affect graduate employment prospects for some years.

Traineeships

The Singapore government's US\$34 billion bailout package for the city's economy announced in March has enabled the two main universities to offer paid work to the graduating cohort. "Traineeships will be available across NTU's colleges, schools, research centres and institutes, as well as corporate and joint laboratories with strong industry engagement," the university said in its announcement on 24 April.

NTU President Subra Suresh said in a statement last week: "Our graduating seniors are naturally worried about uncertainties in the current job market and we are pursuing all possible avenues to help them in their job search."

NUS is providing 1,000 jobs and traineeships for the graduating cohort this year under the university's so-called 'Resilience and Growth Initiative', including 200 full-time paid positions within the university.

"These positions span roles in NUS' central administration, 17 faculties and schools, 29 research institutes and centres, and the National University Health System," the NUS said last week.

Another 800 paid traineeships, 80% funded by the government's Workforce Singapore programme and also open to masters and PhD students, will run for 12 months and include personalised mentoring, according to the university.

Trainees on the executive and professional track will participate in administrative and executive functions such as corporate planning, finance, human resources, procurement and information technology, the university said.

Education trainees will help develop teaching materials, conduct tutorial classes and supervise laboratory sessions, while research trainees "will work with top NUS scientists in conducting cutting-edge research, especially in projects with an industry partner," it said.

An entrepreneurship track will be attached to **NUS Enterprise**, the university's innovation arm, "for hands-on experience in venture creation to prepare them for their own ventures".

Government-funded job creation

"Essentially it's the government channelling resources through the universities to enable them to provide jobs," said Lim, adding that going through universities "makes sense

because at least universities will have some idea of the kind of activity that will not cause students to have a gap in their resumé. It's a way to pump some rescue money into the economy but in a more targeted way."

"Clearly it's a good thing to do in the short to medium run. But I'm not very optimistic about the medium to long term. The universities are all set up for a global order, including the global industrial economic order which is going to change. We cannot go back to the way things were."

She cautioned that "two years of foregone income and additional paper qualifications are not the same as graduate employment" during a time of change.

"It's a good stopgap measure, but we don't know right now if what the graduates will be doing will actually be related to their future employment. At least it buys some time, puts money in their [graduates'] pockets, keeps them occupied and some of them will develop skills that will work and others will not."

It also solves another problem for universities if the entering class is smaller because of demographic decline and recession, where people prefer to work if they can, rather than pay for higher degrees.

"This helps the universities to use up some of their excess capacity," she said, referring to some of the continuing education courses being offered by the universities aimed at improving employability.

Continuing education courses

NUS and NTU have also stressed that trainees can enrol for free in a wide range of continuing education courses set up under the country's lifelong learning programme.

At NTU the graduating cohort can receive a credit line worth SG\$1,600 (US\$1,100), specifically for alumni, which can be used to offset fees for NTU continuing education and training (CET) courses, valid until June 2021. It doubles the existing SG\$1,600 in credits available to alumni for CET courses.

"Our newest graduates will now have the opportunity to apply these new alumni credits to benefit from various NTU continuing education courses, and to selectively stack their academic credits from these courses towards a MiniMasters Certificate. This will give them a competitive edge in securing employment," said NTU's Suresh. A MiniMasters has half the academic load of a full masters.

Course credits earned from a MiniMasters programme can count towards the requirements for a full masters degree, which could be pursued at a later date. The National Institute of Education at NTU already offers 12 MiniMasters programmes.

Both universities have set up special funds to assist current students in need.

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